

# VISION

THE QUALITATIVE CHALLENGE AUTUMN 2011

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## DON'T PUT ALL YOUR EGGS IN THE SAME SOCIAL MEDIA BASKET

Jon Watts discusses how to integrate qual thinking to get the best out of social media research...

The marriage of qual and the World Wide Web is nothing new. For years, ethnographers, webnographers and semioticians have argued that the internet provides us with spontaneously occurring data that allows direct access into how consumers 'do' culture.

However, until recently, a lack of available technology had almost forced a qualitative approach to researching consumers online. We had to spend hours and hours immersing ourselves in different areas of the web, reading, classifying and analysing a huge variety of consumer generated data manually, partly because we loved it, but also because we HAD TO. There just wasn't another way to research the internet.

With the advent of tools that measure and monitor online consumer conversation, we researchers now have the entire web at our fingertips, the ability to trawl the internet at the touch of a button. This changes the rules of the game.

### Is it time for a different emphasis?

When done properly, social media monitoring can give you a lot of information that with rigorous analysis and the employment of qualitative approaches, can lead you to some great insights. However there is a danger that hype around social media monitoring currently exceeds its capacity to deliver as a standalone methodology. Having used these tools across a range of clients in the

past, I am inclined to agree. Not least because face to face research can still answer a myriad of questions and 'fill in the gaps' that you simply can't get by using these tools alone.

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At Incite, we are taking a different approach. We have incorporated our qualitative-focused approach to social media monitoring into a wider toolkit of methodologies that we access (when appropriate) to gain consumer insight that will impact on our clients' businesses.

Here are some of the ways we do this.

### We treat blogs like focus group transcripts

Whenever we see an interesting trend or spike in the social media tool data, our team of qualitative researchers go through the data manually, reading through each one individually, adding interpretation and taking the insight beyond the numbers. In this way we are able to provide additional insight that enables us to really understand triggers to social media buzz, motivating language, tonality, what the essence of a conversation is.



**Show and tell**

The internet is a highly visual medium. The pictures, videos, and photos that are prevalent online are wonderful sources of insight and can really help enrich our understanding of what's driving online conversation or a particular trend. For example the images that a blogger chooses to supplement their rant about Brand X, could tell you a lot more about what they mean than simply reading their article in isolation. Is a consumer response to a piece of bad PR to change/play with the brand logo and identity to make their point, rather than talk about it? Likewise brands with distinct visual identities (size/shape/colour of packaging) could see consumer 'conversation' manifest itself in a visual, not in a written way.

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**Zoom in, zoom out**

Qualitative work requires you to distil hours of interviews, hundreds of consumer stories and hundreds of thousands of words into a series of actionable, pertinent points, whilst still maintaining that connection back to the words, body language and sentiment from which it all came. The same goes for social media analysis – big picture and detail should live side by side. In this way we link the tiny details (such as language, semantics, tonality) with broader macro issues (larger scale cultural meaning, volumetrics).

**Beware contaminated content**

Social media content does not always reflect the authentic views of consumers. Companies and affiliated organisations try to influence and create social media 'buzz' for their own ends. Indeed, commentators such as Vovici have long flagged practices such as 'astrosurfing' (stimulating the appearance of a grassroots campaign for or against a brand) and 'spamdexing' (creating social media comments in order to build links that will improve a site's ranking on search engines) that can distort results in some categories.

Of course, all methodologies have their drawbacks with regards to data quality. Qualitative research's ongoing battle with the groupie, and managing dominant respondents in groups are testament to that. However just watch out – just because it's been written down, doesn't mean that it's necessarily a pure consumer-generated comment.

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## Culture itself is remarkably consistent and uniform

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**Know when to stop**

If you're lucky, your search will throw up thousands of analysable blogs & posts, which leads to the inevitable question – "do I need to read all of them?" In our experience, for all the 'individual' expressions and posts on a topic that you find, culture itself is actually remarkably consistent and uniform. Cast your analysis as wide as you can, when you stop finding out anything new then, well, stop. You don't need to waste time going through the entire data set of posts to feel that the research is robust enough, if the dataset isn't throwing up anything different or adding to the story.

**Moving forward**

In recent years, social media has developed to be a significant part of the consumer landscape. Indeed many think that it is the death knell for survey research – why should consumers bother to give us survey feedback on brands and companies if they can say what they like in a way they like it at the click of a button? Our view is that it is only by integrating different sources of data that you get the real picture of what is going on, and in order to do that, you need as much of a qualitative mindset as a quantitative one.

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